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SUBJECT: CHAD/SUDAN: MASALIT RESTIVENESS

¶1. (SBU) Summary: A new Darfur rebel group is being formed composed of Masalit who object to control by Zaghawans, whether Chadian or Darfurian. The group may not get off the ground, but its formation is indicative of the splintering trend among the Darfur rebels and dissatisfaction among Masalit. End summary.

¶2. Djabadine Hissein, a Sudanese Masalit resident off and on for many years in Ndjamena, called on poloff June 6. He said that the Masalit (concentrated in West Darfur although Djabadine himself comes from south of Khartoum, where a significant Masalit population migrated decades ago) were fed up with their secondary role in the Darfur rebellion. He said that the Masalit had not had a significant role in the instigation of the Darfur rebellion and now had only a few significant leaders in the rebel movements. But, he said, a disproportionate number of the rebel fighters (most of them, he claimed) had been Masalit since the beginning of the conflict. He said he was part of a group of Masalit who are forming a new faction which hoped to give the Masalit a leadership role in the rebellion commensurate with their fighting role.

¶3. According to Djabadine, the new Masalit faction -- which as yet has taken no specific name -- is being spearheaded by Abderrahman Ibrahim Shigaf and al-Sadiq al-Karim. The former is a cousin of the Masalit sultan Sa'd Bahr al-Din (who, he said, is a lackey of the Sudanese government). The latter is to be the new group's military leader. Djabadine is the No. 3, or secretary general. He claims that the group has widespread Masalit support but no backing from any external party (e.g., Islamists, Libya, Eritrea, or Chad) other than Masalit expatriates. They want to continue the rebellion, do not want to add to disunity among the rebels, but insist that the Masalit, who do most of the fighting, must no longer be dominated by "nomads" -- whether Darfurian Zaghawans or the Chadian Zaghawan regime or Arabs.

¶4. Djabadine said that the two significant Masalit rebel leaders -- Khamis Abdulla and Ibrahim Yahya -- are discredited among the Masalit, and they will probably not be part of the new group. Ibrahim Yahya was, heretofore, the only Masalit in the JEM leadership, but he split from Khalil Ibrahim in recent days. Djabine said that he was in active contact with Ibrahim Yahya, but because the latter is an Islamist and Turabist, like Khalil Ibrahim, he does not trust him. The new Masalit faction is anti-Islamist.

¶5. As for Khamis Abdulla, who has been a leader in the nonsignatory SLA since the SLA split up in the wake of the Abuja accord in May 2006, he has become a non-factor. Djabadine said that Khamis Abdulla has alienated the mass of the Masalit populace. The reason is that President Deby has used the Masalit fighters under Khamis Abdulla as a force to attack Chadian rebels. The new Masalit faction is, he said, determined to avoid distracting the rebellion from its real objective and being manipulated by the Chadian Zaghawan

regime. However, Djabadine claimed, Khamis Abdulla is now also discredited in Deby's eyes, after his visit last month to Ndjamena, and he has "fled" to Eritrea. Meanwhile, the new faction is also finding it tough to cope in Ndjamena and is looking around to set up in a new country, perhaps temporarily Tanzania.

¶6. Note on Djabadine Hissein: Aged 57, he claims to be a former Sudanese military officer and to have fled Sudan in 1975 for Chad. He says he was close to former Chadian President Goukouni Weddeye and to have participated in Deby's ouster of Habre. Deby's half-brother Daoussa used him, for a time, for sensitive missions related to Sudan, most recently in 1997 to see Hasan al-Turabi in Khartoum to discuss an SPLA plan to destabilize Chad due to Deby's then-closeness to the Sudanese regime. (The mission, he says, was thwarted by Turabi's close associates and then-senior Sudanese officials Jabir and Khalil Ibrahim, the latter of whom is now head of JEM.) Djabadine said that he has been largely inactive ever since, operating "under the radar" mostly in Ndjamena.

¶7. Comment: This new faction may be nothing more than a pipe dream in the eyes of a handful of Masalit milling around Ndjamena. But mounting disaffection among the Masalit seems plausible enough. And this overture to us, laying out a new, ethnic-based faction, is one further sign of mounting disunity among the Darfur rebels.

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